Lack of Affirmation in Childhood and Adult Romantic Relationships

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Introduction

Theoretical Background

- According to affirmation theory, a child's sense of worthiness is linked to the primary caregiver's affirmation, manifested through genuine acceptance, consistent emotional availability, and unconditional love[1].
- Emotional Deprivation Disorder (EDD)[1]: an adulthood syndrome stemming from a lack of affirmation during childhood, encompasses symptoms such as insecurity, inadequacy, emotional disconnection, and interpersonal challenges.

The Current Literature

- Early caregiving experiences play a crucial role in shaping psychosocial outcomes into adulthood, although with varying developmental trajectories[2].
- Empirical evidence has substantiated the association between the quality of parent-child relationships within an individual's familial background and the functionality of adult romantic relationships[3].

The Research Gap

- Lack of concrete understanding of adulthood syndrome originating from a lack of affirmation in childhood
- Lack of in-depth understanding of lived experiences of individuals with a lack of affirmation in childhood
- Need to examine the developmental trajectories stemming from a lack of affirmation

Objectives

This study aims to empirically investigate their childhood and adulthood experiences of individuals with a history of a lack of affirmation with the following research questions:

1. **How do individuals with a lack of affirmation perceive their childhood and early caregiving experiences?**
2. **How do individuals with a lack of affirmation perceives themselves, navigate their emotional life, and interpersonal relationships?**
3. **In what ways do individuals perceive the influences of a lack of affirmation on their current romantic relationship?**

Methods

Sample

- Purposive sampling from a survey to collect quantitative data ($n = 7$)
- Inclusion Criteria: Aged 18-35, in a romantic relationship over 3 months, and proficient in English
- 30-45 minutes Semi-structured interview

Analysis

- Deductive Qualitative Analysis[4]
  - Used to evaluate and refine an existing theory
- Open, axial, and selective coding[5]
  - Constructivist Grounded Theory
  - Weekly research meetings to check codes
  - Member-checking with participants
- Dedoose

Results

Table 1. *The shared experiences throughout childhood and adulthood of those who did not receive affirmation from their parents.*

Main Themes	Definitions	Subthemes
Childhood Experiences		

Impinging Factors	Impinging factors of Emotional Deprivation Disorder.	1. Parental emotional immaturity
		2. Parental absence/ irresponsibility
		3. Parental abuse
		4. External Factors
		   a) Parental stress
		   b) Single parenthood

Lack of Affirmation	Childhood needs for affirmation were unmet.	1. Not validated or valued 2. Contingent on conditions
Emotional Challenges		
Negative Emotions	Experiences of an influx of negative emotions.	1. Anxiety over security 2. Performance anxiety 3. Fear in relationship
Emotional Immaturity	Lack of awareness and suppression of emotions.	1. Blurriness of emotions 2. Emotional suppression 3. Dissonance between emotion and behavior
Sense of Self/ Self-Esteem		
Weak Sense of Self	Trouble establishing and maintaining a strong sense of self.	1. Insecurity 2. Lack of self-worth 3. Identity confusion
Interpersonal Functioning		
Behaviors to Seek Security	Intrinsic motivations of seeking safety influence the individual's behaviors in their relationships.	1. Seeking validation/ acceptance 2. Unhealthy boundaries a) Lenient vs. rigid 3. Defensiveness 4. Clinginess 5. Distancing
Parallel Patterns		
Anticipation of Relationship	Having parallel negative expectations toward relationship as they did toward their parent.	1. Fear of intimacy/vulnerability 2. Submissive tendencies
View of Self	Parallel view of self in childhood and now.	1. Self-value tied to something external 2. Self-harshness
Resilience	Resilience to mitigate negative effects of childhood.	1. Do opposite of what parents did 2. Therapy 3. Healthy coping

Discussion

- The current study informs how unmet emotional needs in childhood affect personality formation and adulthood experiences.
- The study generated in-depth knowledge regarding the perceptions, emotions, and behaviors related to a weak sense of self, originating from a lack of affirmation.
- The results can help clinicians working with individuals systemically conceptualize and develop appropriate treatment plans for their clients with a history of a lack of affirmation.
- The knowledge of participants' childhood experiences is expected to be resourceful for future prevention research and parenting program development by informing factors adversely influencing child development, such as social determinants and parenting strategies.

Limitations

- Participants' retrospective self-reports.
  - It is uncertain how accurate the data were due to the individual differences in the ability to retain accurate memories.
- Validity and reliability of a lack of affirmation from the primary caregiver are uncertain because there might have been another supportive family member or close adults around the subjects other than the non-affirming caregiver.
- The age range where they had experienced affirmation from parents is not concrete, as the original authors of affirmation theory did not suggest specific age range for the childhood.

Acknowledgments

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